



## Conference Paper

# Bolshevik Discursive Practices: The Emergence of the Genre of Communist Biography (Based on the Materials of the Ural Periodicals Published During the Russian Civil War)

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Yekaterinburg, Russia**Abstract**

After the Bolsheviks took power, they were faced with one of the most important tasks: a communist project to create a New Man. One of the methods used for this purpose was the creation of biographical and autobiographical texts. This article describes the process by which the genre of communist biography emerged in the initial period of the Russian Civil War. The author compares this genre with the hagiographic literature, noting their similar structure. The study is based on Ural periodicals published during the Civil War. It demonstrates that, like hagiographical literature, communist biography depicts not an actual person, but an idealized image: a revolutionary striving for the communism as the higher truth.

**Keywords:** Bolshevik discourse, biography, Ural, Soviet subjectivity, revolutionaries, Russian Civil War

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Received: 22 November 2018

Accepted: 29 November 2018

Published: 23 December 2018

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Selection and Peer-review  
under the responsibility of the  
Facets of Culture in the Age of  
Social Transition Conference  
Committee.

## 1. Introduction

October revolution is often described as a starting point for an unprecedented communist project to create a New Man. This project was carried out through textual forms (among others): biographies and autobiographies whose role was considered substantial in the process of developing Soviet subjectivity. However, as it often happens, cultural changes lagged behind the political shifts, and in 1917 the population of the former empire was not ready to understand and accept the new ideas.

From the moment Bolshevik discourse had become a state discourse, the challenge of establishing communication between the authorities and the masses acquired particular importance. Bolshevik (and, more generally, revolutionary) political language, hardly comprehensible for a majority of the population, was one of the barriers. To overcome this problem, Soviet authorities chose what N. Lebedeva called "an ingeniously

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simple method to achieve their objectives: imbuing with a new content the familiar forms previously used to express a religious worldview" [1, p. 145]. In his theory of social representations, French psychologist Serge Moscovici termed this process 'anchoring'. 'This is the process which draws something foreign and disturbing that intrigues us into our particular system of categories and compares it to the paradigm of a category which we think to be suitable' [2, p. 42]. This process is based on the integration of new phenomena – impressions, relationships, objects, actions – into a pre-existing worldview and established categories, therefore reducing to a minimum the frightening effect of anything new and unknown. Therefore, it is not surprising that the population at large accepted the dogmas of the new faith with such seeming ease.

## 2. Emergence and Development of a Communist Biography in 1918–1920s

The emergence of the genre of communist biography can be traced back to 1918. It is directly related to the first Bolshevik victims of Civil War both in the country at large, and in the Ural region. The first attempts to reinterpret the lives of fallen comrades took the shape of obituaries or reminiscences, either printed in newspapers, or delivered during the commemorative events, or at the grave. These obituaries and reminiscences were inspired by eschatological motives that permeated an entire Bolshevik discourse. Formally, they resembled the lives of saints.

Similarly to the hagiographical literature, which required certain traditional motives ('the future saint is born of pious parents, since childhood shows "diligence" towards church, eschews joys and temptations of secular life and, after becoming a monk, develops into an exemplary ascetic and devotee' [3]). communist biographies written during the Russian Civil War exhibited a distinctive set of norms and rules.

As a rule, a biography began with the description of a difficult childhood or youth, full of poverty and deprivations which preceded the future ordeals of an underground revolutionary. This theme was used to underscore a character's modest social roots and their deep connection with the working masses and the poor. This is the environment which was supposed to foster a future communist – mostly through an awakening of consciousness, that is, an acceptance of party values and an active participation in the building of new life. Here is an example from the speech of Andrei Andreyev about I. Malyshev: "And he demanded the same from the others: proletarian party's discipline was everything to him. And this is no wonder, since this hero was not a

stranger to proletariat in his upbringing: he was from a poor family, and for an entire life lived as a humble proletarian. No surprise then that he became one of the first in our party" [4, p. 3]. Just as the future saints reveal their otherness and their longing for God since childhood (for example, Theodosius Pechersky, Sergius of Radonezh, Seraphim of Sarov and others were said to be engaged in church activities since childhood, shunning ordinary childhood games), the saints of the new pantheon since childhood had an acute feeling of injustice of the old world and a desire to devote their life to the building of new society, bringing kingdom of heaven to earth.

Another characteristic of 'red' biography, logically following from the previous one, is that its heroes dedicate their entire life to the party work and to the building of new world. This is how Sergei Mrachkovsky described his party comrade I. Malyshev: "He devoted all his time to his work – not all his *free* time, but *all* his time" [4, p. 3]. Compare this to another statement about Malyshev, this time from Krestinsky: "He has given his entire young soul and life to the proletarian revolution; he probably never would be able to give more than he has already given" [5, p. 3]. Revolutionary work became the goal and the meaning of life, it justified individuals' existence and made them agents in their own life and in the unfolding History: 'The life of comrade Sverdlov was a continuous feat of struggle. Since his youth, merely a boy, he had joined the revolutionary struggle, and till his last day, till the last minute of his life, he had no other profession, no other title but the title of a revolutionary' [6, p. 3]. For a saint, the meaning of life was in a devotion first and foremost to God, and only afterwards to the 'suffering humanity' [7, p. 28] – a revolutionary strived to save millions of workers and peasants lives. Therefore, Bolshevik rhetoric typically made use of images and ideas of a so-called secular messianism. This was already noted by Nikolai Berdyaev in his work *Philosophiya neravenstva* ('Philosophy of Inequality'): 'Socialism professes a messianic faith. Proletariat is a messiah class. Messianic proletarian "idea" is kept by a special hierarchy – a Communist party, extremely centralized and wielding a dictatorial power' [8, p. 220]. In place of a messiah, we find a party with its apostles and saints who are supposed to introduce justice, peace and harmony on earth.

At the same time, according to Bolshevik political discourse, a revolutionary was not allowed to experience such common human emotions as sadness, apathy, depression, etc. 'Red' biographies depict 'true communists' as always energetic, never discouraged people, who always support the others and inspire them by example: "But wherever Sverdlov appeared, everything was different. A mere presence of this iron man animated and inspired the others" [6, p. 3]. A typical metaphor, particularly favored by the Bolsheviks in their descriptions of revolutionary heroes, is a metaphor of fire. According

to V.Paperny, Culture 1 (which chronologically began in 1917) assigns a special meaning to fire: it is the main element of this culture that is characterized by 'the pathos of fire, the pathos of burning' [9, p. 41]. An individual is burning, an old world is burning, new lights shine upon the new industrial projects and crematoria... 'Burning eyes' belonging to the young communists can be found if not in every communist biography, then in every other one: "Among these lonely figures I see a young beautiful girl with the burning black eyes. She is all fire, all impetus, all striving. Her soul is fired up with an uncompromising hatred for tsarism and with an unbounded love for the workers and all those who suffer" [10, p. 2]. Compare this with a similar description of S.Tsvilling: "Everybody was transfixed by an orator; he was wearing a grey army overcoat. Of a small stature and with a gaunt face – but his burning exalted gaze was suffused with an inner faith, with a spiritual fire..." [11, p. 1]. A revolutionary remained unto death an uncompromising warrior, burning and overflowing with a faith in the glorious future. Despair and depression were as much scorned in the Bolshevik power discourse as they were in Christianity, because they signified a disbelief into the communist glorious future (which was tantamount to a betrayal and a social death of an individual).

Another characteristic of a communist biography is a complete or partial lack of private life of its character. As we have already noted, for a true underground revolutionary the goal and meaning of life was a fight for a proletariat's glorious future. Private life should not have distracted from the public life, which took a central stage in Bolshevik power discourse. The lack of private life was considered good form and imbued with positive connotations: "Private life, joys of life – everything that the majority of people fill their lives with, held very little meaning for him [for Sverdlov]. All his efforts, all his thoughts and wishes were devoted to the revolution" [6, p. 3]. The preference of private life over public was considered a betrayal of the revolution. It shared semantic field with such words as 'degradation' and 'suicide': "And so in exile, being thousand kilometers from the cultural centers, in wretched places where people were completely separated from the proletariat and from their work, many gave up, their energy and will weakened, they sank lower, turned to private life, many committed suicides" [6, p. 3]. Sometimes this urge to describe asceticism was bordering on the ridiculous, when people who were described as having "no private, personal life" [4, p. 3] suddenly acquired children during the Civil War: "Despite his youth, comrade Malyshev never lived for himself or for his family hearth: his first child was born when he was fighting at the Dutovsky front" [12, p. 1]. This asceticism was undoubtedly directly related to the wartime conditions, where all efforts and thoughts were required to overcome the enemies. After the Civil war, during the

peaceful reconstruction, private life comes back – although its role is still limited and conditional: it has to occupy a secondary place compared to the public life.

Another aspect that deserves our attention is the language of revolutionary biographies. It was replete with metaphors and expressions referring to the New Testament. Revolutionaries were compared to the martyrs, each with their own road to Calvary: “All of us, suffering from the rude shouts and blows from the convoy, were glancing back to her, so as to draw courage from her gaze and her bravery, courage to walk down our road to Calvary of suffering” [10, p. 2]. Pain brought by the loss of comrades was described as ‘crown of thorns’: “In a desperate battle with the band of black Cossacks, our honest warrior has fallen. His foes rejoiced at his death, while for us it was a crown of thorns” [13, p. 2]. The future communist kingdom was described as a promised land: “They, fallen, dropped their banners – we have to pick up these banners and carry them into the promised land” [14, p. 3]. These stylistic traits were most likely inspired not only by a desire to talk to the masses in a language they could understand, but also with the impossibility at the time to escape completely the discourse which surrounded these people for most of their lives. Therefore, during the period of anarchy (or, rather, multi-archy); before the emergence of their own official language termed by P. Serio ‘wooden’ (French, *langue de bois*) [15], Bolshevik authors had to borrow expressive means from the old regime.

### 3. Conclusion

Communist biography was one of the most efficient tools for creating a New Man: it provided moral guidance and shaped a new power discourse. Biographies of zealous communists during the Civil war were remarkably similar to hagiographies – similar rather in their form than in their content. Just like the lives of saints, they followed the strict rules of the genre and offered an idealized image of a revolutionary hero, which often had little to do with an actual biography of a person. Of course, the goal of this literature was not to collect all kinds of data and use them to reconstruct an actual biography of their characters; rather, the goal was to tell a story of the character’s search for truth – that is, communism: “And if the younger generation would need such a book which would teach it about true historical heroes – a simple biography of Yakov [Sverdlov] would be just such a book” [6, p. 3]. Therefore, the sources of this type provide us with a valuable information not so much about their characters, but rather about the rethinking of such ethical concepts as revolutionary morality, duty and

justice. These concepts emerged during the revolution and the Civil war and became the foundation of Soviet culture for years to come.

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